

The Examined Life

Examining... Freedom and Power

Supplementary Quotes

Plato's Republic

“The society we have described can never grow into a reality or see the light of day, and there will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed, my dear Glaucon, of humanity itself, till philosophers become rulers in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands.”

Foucault's Discipline and Punishment

“Traditionally, power was what was seen, what was shown, and what was manifested...Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is this fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. And the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification. In this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially by arranging objects. The examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification.”

Hayek's Road to Serfdom

“Freedom to order our own conduct in the sphere where material circumstances force a choice upon us, and responsibility for the arrangement of our own life according to our own conscience, is the air in which alone moral sense grows and in which moral values are daily recreated in the free decision of the individual. Responsibility, not to a superior, but to one's own conscience, the awareness of a duty not exacted by compulsion, the necessity to decide which of the things one values are to be sacrificed to others, and to bear the consequences of one's own decision, are the very essence of any morals which deserve the name.”

Rawls's A Theory of Justice

“Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason, justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many. Therefore in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled; the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests. The only thing that permits us to acquiesce in an erroneous theory is the lack of a better one; analogously, an injustice is tolerable only when it is necessary to avoid an even greater injustice. Being first virtues of human activities, truth and justice are uncompromising.”

“The natural distribution is neither just nor unjust; nor is it unjust that persons are born into society at some particular position. These are simply natural facts. What is just and unjust is the way that institutions deal with these facts.”

Nozick's Anarchy, State, Utopia

“If D1 was a just distribution, and people voluntarily moved from it to D2, transferring parts of their shares they were given under D1 (what was it for if not to do something with?), isn't D2 also just? If the people were entitled to dispose of the resources to which they were entitled (under D1), didn't this include their being entitled to give it to, or exchange it with, Wilt Chamberlain? Can anyone else complain on grounds of justice? Each other person already has his legitimate share under D1. Under D1, there is nothing that anyone has that anyone else has a claim of justice against. After someone transfers something to Wilt Chamberlain, third parties still have their legitimate shares; their shares are not changed. By what process could such a transfer among two persons give rise to a legitimate claim of distributive justice on a portion of what was transferred, by a third party who had no claim of justice on any holding of the others before the transfer?”

“Once a person exists, not everything compatible with his overall existence being a net plus can be done, even by those who created him. An existing person has claims, even against those whose purpose in creating him was to violate those claims.”

Isaiah Berlin

“True pluralism is much more tough-minded and intellectually bold: it rejects the view that all conflicts of values can be finally resolved by synthesis and that all desirable goals may be reconciled. It recognises that human nature generates values which, though equally sacred, equally ultimate, exclude one another, without there being any possibility of establishing an objective hierarchical relation among them. Moral conduct may therefore involve making agonising choices, without the help of universal criteria, between incompatible but equally desirable values.”

Hobbes' Leviathan

“Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry... no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

“To this war of every man against every man, this also in consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law, where no law, no injustice. Force, and fraud, are in war the cardinal virtues.”

Rousseau's Social Contract

“The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had some one pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: "Do not listen to this imposter. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!"

“Every man having been born free and master of himself, no one else may under any pretext whatever subject him without his consent. To assert that the son of a slave is born a slave is to assert that he is not born a man.”

Locke's Second Treatise on Government

“This makes it Lawful for a Man to Kill a Thief, who has not in the least hurt him, nor declared any design upon his life, any farther then by the use of Force, so to get him in his Power, as to take away his Money, or what he pleases from him.: because using force, where he has no Right, to get me into his Power, let his pretense be what it will, I have no reason to purpose that he, who would take away my Liberty, would not when he had me in his Power, take away every thing else. And therefore it is Lawful for me to treat him, as one who has put himself into a State of War with me, I.e. kill him if I can; for to that hazard does he justly expose himself, whoever introduces a State of War, and is Aggressor in it.”

“Wherever, therefore, any number of men so unite into one society, as to quit everyone his executive power of the law of Nature, and to resign it to the public, there, and there only, is a political or civil society. [...] Hence it is evident that absolute monarchy, which by some men [e.g., Hobbes] is counted the only government in the world, is indeed inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all.”

Zizek's In Defence of Lost Causes

“Better to do nothing than to engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly. The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active", to "participate", to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, "doing something"; academics participate in meaningless "debates," etc.; but the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from it all. Those in power often prefer even "critical" participation or a critical dialogue to silence, since to engage us in such a "dialogue" ensures that our ominous passivity is broken. The "Bartlebian act" I propose is violent precisely insofar as it entails ceasing this obsessive activity-in it, violence and non-violence overlap (non-violence appears as the highest violence), likewise activity and inactivity (the most radical thing is to do nothing).”

“If the secret core of potlatch is the reciprocity of exchange, why is this reciprocity not asserted directly, why does it assume the “mystified” form of two consecutive acts each of which is staged as a free voluntary display of generosity? Here we encounter the paradoxes of forced choice, of freedom to do what is necessary, at its most elementary: I have to do freely what I am expected to do. (If, upon receiving a gift, I immediately return it to the giver, this direct circulation would amount to an extremely aggressive gesture of humiliation, it would signal that I refused the other’s gifts — recall those embarrassing moments when elderly people forget and give us last year’s present once again ...)

...the reciprocity of exchange is in itself thoroughly ambiguous; at its most fundamental, it is destructive of the social bond, it is the logic of revenge, tit for tat. To cover this aspect of exchange, to make it benevolent and pacific, one has to pretend that each person’s gift is free and stands on its own. This brings us to potlatch as the “pre-economy of the economy,” its zero-level, that is, exchange as the reciprocal relation of two non-productive expenditures. If the gift belongs to Master and exchange to the Servant, potlatch is the paradoxical exchange between Masters. Potlatch is simultaneously the zero-level of civility, the paradoxical point at which restrained civility and obscene consumption overlap, the point at which it is polite to behave impolitely.”